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ABSTRACT

Family literacy programs have been demonstrated to have significant and widespread benefits for children, parents, families, and society. Documented benefits of family literacy programs to children appear in the following areas: children's achievement in school, school attendance, oral language development, reading comprehension and vocabulary, writing, self-esteem and school attitudes, and health. Studies have also shown that parents who participate in family literacy programs achieve gains in employment status and job satisfaction and demonstrate improved attitudes about education, reading and writing ability, math and science knowledge, and knowledge of parenting skills and child development. Families who have participated in family literacy programs have been shown to learn to value education, become more involved in schools, and become emotionally closer. Research has also confirmed that family literacy programs have positive effects on the following social problems: nutrition and health problems, low school achievement and high school dropout rates, teen parenting, joblessness and welfare dependency, and social alienation. (Contains 58 references.) (MN)

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Family Literacy Programs:

Who Benefits?

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Designing and delivering literacy programs that benefit both parents and children makes sense. But do family literacy programs really work? And if they do, who benefits? School administrators and community leaders want to know the answers to these questions before deciding to support family literacy programs financially and in other ways.

The concept of family literacy is firmly rooted in a substantial research base from several disciplines, including adult literacy, emergent literacy, child development, and systems analysis. We reviewed research from each of these disciplines to find answers to the questions raised by school and community decision-makers. The results are summarized below. In brief, results show that family literacy programs do work. Moreover, at least four groups benefit: children, parents, families, and society. The numbers following each summary statement correspond to the research studies listed in the bibliography. Those interested in learning more about the particular benefits of family literacy programs should be able to find and read these references in most college or university libraries.

Children Benefit from Family Literacy Programs

- Children's achievement in school improves (11, 13, 25, 28, 29, 50, 57). One review of 53 studies showed, beyond dispute, that student achievement results from increased parent involvement in education (25).
- Children attend school more regularly and are more likely to complete their educations (11, 39, 40). This has been a persistent finding for nearly 30 years.
- Children's general knowledge, including that measured by intelligence tests, improves (23, 33, 49). One major research review found that the learning environment in the home accounts for more than half of the variance in IQ test scores (33).
- Children's oral language development accelerates (5, 9, 50, 51, 55). Reading aloud to children is the single most effective parent practice for enhancing language and literacy development (22).
- Children's overall reading achievement improves (12, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 23, 26, 27, 30, 39, 41, 47, 54, 55, 56). One study of more than 38,000 chil-

dren found that those who reported home environments that fostered reading had higher reading achievement (18).

- Children's reading vocabulary improves (5, 49, 55). Even Start children, for example, gain at double the expected rate on a standardized vocabulary measure (49).
- Children's decoding ability improves (5, 34). That is, they become more able to identify unknown words in print.
- Children's comprehension improves (21, 34). These separate factors -- vocabulary, decoding, and comprehension -- combine to support overall improvement in reading.
- Children's writing improves (14, 23, 53, 55).
- Children's math (14, 39) and science (42) achievement improve. Gains in these three areas -- writing, math, and science -- are particularly impressive since few family literacy program goals specifically address these subjects.
- Children's self esteem and attitudes toward school improve (30, 39). Both of these have the potential to assist and support children throughout their lives.
- Children are healthier (20, 45). Aside from its general importance, good health is related to higher achievement in school.

Parents Benefit from Family Literacy Programs

- Parents are far more likely to persist in family literacy programs than in other types of adult literacy programs. Those who persist have more opportunity to learn (1, 2, 22, 24, 35, 37, 38, 43, 58).
- Parents' attitudes about education improve; the value they perceive in education increases (1, 38, 49).
- Parents' reading achievement increases (14, 22, 35, 43, 58). This finding, which is one of the most persistent in the research, also applies to English as a Second Language (ESL) parents.
- Parents' writing ability improves (14, 22). More research needs to be conducted in this area, but preliminary results are very promising.
- Parents' math (14) and science (42) knowledge increases. This is especially true if the family literacy program includes focus on these areas.
- Parents' knowledge about "good parenting" and child development improves

(22, 58). For example, parents in one project became more confident about their abilities to foster their children's positive development (58).

- Parents enhance their employment status and job satisfaction (3, 38, 48, 49). Several large-scale studies, including the national Even Start evaluation, have shown this to be the case.

Families Benefit from Family Literacy Programs

- Families learn to value education (28, 36, 38, 44). This finding has emerged from studies of children, parents, and families.
- Families become more involved in schools (25, 39, 44). Family involvement in schools leads to better achievement for children (25).
- Families become emotionally closer (22, 42). Family literacy activities bring parents and children closer together.

Society Benefits from Family Literacy Programs

Parents tend to persist in family literacy programs, and persistence leads to literacy achievement, which in turn can break cycles of economic disadvantage. In particular, family literacy programs positively affect (or have the potential to affect) several major social problems:

- Nutrition and health problems (13, 20).
- Low school achievement and high school drop out rates (3, 220, 38).
- Teen parenting (3, 31, 38).
- Joblessness and welfare dependency (3, 13, 38, 48).
- Social alienation (44).

Family literacy programs do work, and their benefits are widespread and significant. Even though large scale family literacy program models are in early stages of implementation and evaluation, the existing body of research points to their enormous potential to positively impact the lives of parents and children who are in most desperate need of family support and education.

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